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Feature

TDCJ employee's organ donation gives retiree hope for healthy life

Joe Schmidt was a 20-year TDCJ veteran when he retired from the Facilities Division's regional maintenance department in the spring of 2014. Never one to sit still for long, by fall of that year he had returned to work as a carpentry instructor for Windham School District. After only a few weeks on the job, he began to gain a large amount of weight and felt weak. Joe didn't know what was wrong, but he knew he had a serious health problem.

Schmidt promptly went to his doctor, who began to test for the problem, but even before the test results were in, Joe took a turn for the worse. A trip to the emergency room led to a hard diagnosis: Joe had a rare disease that was causing his kidneys to go into end-stage renal failure, which means they simply quit functioning. "I was in the hospital for nine or ten days," Joe said, looking back on the beginning of his medical troubles. "I was pretty close to death."

Fortunately, Joe's condition stabilized, allowing doctors at Houston Methodist Hospital to try and "kick start" his kidneys so they might regain normal function. Schmidt was put on a strict treatment regimen including dialysis three times a week and chemotherapy once a month for six months, but his



When former TDCJ employee Joe Schmidt (left) went into renal failure and needed a kidney transplant, Ramsey Unit Sergeant Craig Christiansen (right) heard about the situation, was tested for compatibility and became Joe's donor.

health deteriorated and he lost most of his physical strength. Joe described his continued decline, saying, "I went from being able to walk and drive to needing a cane, to needing a walker, to almost needing a wheelchair. I couldn't drive myself and I even needed help getting in the truck."

Despite regular physical therapy, Joe still needed help and he thanks God for the friends and family who stood by his side when he was at his weakest, including the

people who drove him from Rosharon to Houston at 3:30 in the morning for his dialysis, and those who stayed with him during the four-and-a-half hour treatment. Mostly, he is grateful to his wife Brenda, who he refers to as an "angel." Working to control his emotions, he said, "They took care of me, got me where I needed to go."

Everyone knew that if the treatment regimen failed, Joe would need a kidney transplant. Soon after his chemotherapy was finished,

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his doctors decided Joe's kidney function would never return and recommended he begin the paperwork to become a transplant recipient.

The registration process took a few months but once on the list, Joe didn't have a long wait. He expected his new kidney might come from a family member or a close friend, but the first person to step up was someone Joe occasionally passed in the halls of the Ramsey Unit.

Craig Christiansen is an Operational Review sergeant at the Ramsey Unit and his job duties take him throughout the facility. Occasionally, he stops by the agricultural building where Joe's wife Brenda works as a clerk. Last year, he was visiting with Brenda and noticed that she seemed sad, which was unusual for the normally upbeat woman. Craig was aware that Joe was sick, but on that day Brenda shared the news he was in need of a kidney transplant.

Craig says he doesn't really know what compelled him, but he went home that night and prayed about the decision. He said, "I've al-

ways tried to help people as much as I can. Some people go through life wondering what their purpose is. My purpose is to help. That's why I'm here." He told Brenda the next day that he would get tested to see if he might be a donor match.

"Joe and I have been through a lot together over the past 28 years, but nothing can prepare you emotionally or physically for something like this," Brenda said, adding, "The day that Craig told me he was going to get tested, it was very emotional for both of us. I just didn't realize we have so many people who really care about us, and that our cross to bear is their cross to bear because they love us."

Over the next few months, Craig underwent a barrage of blood tests and was told by the doctors that he needed to improve his health with a better diet and some weight loss. He eliminated carbohydrates, alcohol and soft drinks from his diet and lost 40 pounds. At the same time, test results proved that Christianson and Schmidt were a match and the kidney transplant could proceed. Expressing his surprise, Joe commented, "Who would

have thought that the first person to be tested would be the one? My doctor said, 'You hit the lottery.'"

The surgery took place on January 12 at Houston Methodist and, according to the doctors, everything went very well. Craig recovered quickly from the procedure and returned to work in early March. Joe's body has accepted the transplant and now, with a perfectly functioning "new" kidney, Joe is eager to get back to some of his favorite activities like hunting and fishing. "It's been a journey. We've still got a little ways to go, but we're rolling now."

Craig and Joe now get together for a little conversation almost every day. Commenting on his relationship with the man who just wanted to help a coworker who seemed a little down and ended up literally giving away a part of himself to save a life, Joe says, "He's like a brother to me now. We're blood brothers. He's part of my family." ●